THE NEW
INDIAN EXPRESS

BENGALURU • THURSDAY • FEBRUARY 08, 2024 • ₹9.00 • PAGES 22 • LATE CITY EDITION

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TWIN BLASTS ROCK PAK BEFORE ELECTIONS

A day before Pakistan's general elections, twin blasts shook up Balochistan on Wednesday leaving 30 people dead and 40 others injured. So far, no one has claimed responsibility. Separatist groups operating in Balochistan are the prime suspects for the blasts. Balochistan's home minister Jan Achakzai said elections would be held as per schedule | PTI | AP/PTI

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Local Delhi court concurs with ED, summons Kejri

Finds prima facie offence of intentionally disobeying the probe agency's summonses

JAISON WILSON @ New Delhi

DELHI Chief Minister **Arvind Kejriwal** on Wednesday appeared to lose some wriggle room as a local court summoned him to appear before it on February 17 in the excise policy scam case. It issued the order after taking cognisance of a plea filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) complaining that Kejriwal had failed to comply with its summons in the case for the fifth consecutive time.

"Prima facie offence under Section 174 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 is made out and there are sufficient grounds for proceeding under Section 204 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 against accused Mr. Arvind Kejriwal," Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Divya Malhotra said in her order.

As per Section 174, a person who intentionally disobeys the directions issued by the probe agency shall be prosecuted and punished with imprisonment extending up to one month or with a fine or both.

The ED had issued summons to Kejriwal on October 30, November 2, December 18, December 22, and January 3 demanding his attendance "to give evidence in connection with the investigation or proceedings under Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA)" on the alleged excise policy scam.

Objecting to the summons as "unsustainable in law", Kejriwal had argued that the ED had failed to disclose the capacity in which he was being called — as a witness or a suspect.

But under PMLA, the investigating officer is not required to disclose the capacity under which a person is summoned at the stage of probe, the agency said in its plea. It would be premature to label the summoned person either as a witness or an accused, it added.

The agency told the court that the investigation carried out so far had revealed that the 2021-22 excise policy was formulated "as a part of a criminal conspiracy by the leaders of Aam Aadmi Party with deliberate loopholes to generate and channelize illegal funds" for themselves as well as the party.

NO BAIL TO SANJAY

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday refused bail to arrested AAP leader Sanjay Singh in the Delhi excise policy scam. "No ground for grant of bail to the accused at this stage is made out," the judge said

Congress leaders from Karnataka led by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah stage a protest against the Centre in New Delhi on Wednesday over the alleged injustice to the state in devolution of funds | PARVEEN NEGI

Modi govt causing injustice to K'taka: CM

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

CHIEF Minister Siddaramaiah, who led a protest in New Delhi along with his cabinet colleagues, Congress MPs and MLAs on Wednesday, alleged that the Union government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi meted out injustice to Karnataka in tax devolution.

The protest, according to political analysts, is part of the Grand Old party's plan to prevent the saffron party from strengthening its base in Karnataka ahead of the LS elections.

The Centre meted out injustice to southern states, particularly Karnataka, in devolution of funds. As per the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, the Finance Commission determines the share of funds between the Centre, States and Union Territories (UTs). The states' struggle against the Centre for their due share within the legal framework will only strengthen the federal system, Siddaramaiah said, defending his government's protest in New Delhi. P4

BJP stages counter protest in Bengaluru

Bengaluru: To counter the Congress protest, Karnataka BJP leaders staged a demonstration at Gandhi statue near Vidhana Soudha on Wednesday | P4

Cong govt harbouring separatist mindset: FM

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

UNION Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday lashed out at the Congress government in Karnataka, accusing it of harbouring a "separatist" mindset and spreading a "false narrative" on the issue of fund allocation by the Centre to states.

Sitharaman was responding to Siddaramaiah government's claims, along with her cabinet colleague Pralhad Joshi, also from Karnataka. She accused CM Siddaramaiah and his cabinet colleagues of making "outrageously false" allegations and said no GST compensation amount is due to the state.

She also took exception to an advertisement issued by the state government to highlight its allegations against the Centre. "These claims come from a separatist mindset. ...The Congress is with those who want 'tukde tukde' (break) of the country," she said, claiming that the advertisement promotes such a language.

In this context, she referred to the remarks of Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar's brother and MP DK Suresh, who had suggested that "South India may seek a separate country" if the Centre's alleged discrimination continues, to slam the Opposition party.

Sitharaman read out figures of funds allocated to the state from the Centre to reject the charges. She claimed that the Siddaramaiah government is feeling the heat due to the financial burden of nearly Rs 58,000 crore for the implementation of his guarantee schemes.

She said the state government has claimed that the Centre has not given a special grant of Rs 5,495 crore as recommended by the 15th Finance Commission. "I want to clearly state that the recommendation did not form part of the final report of the 15th Finance Commission. The question of not accepting does not arise at all," she said.

Over and above the recommendation of the Finance Commission, the Centre has, however, provided Rs 6,279.94 crore as an interest-free loan for 50 years to the state.

The FM asserted that the devolution of taxes and grants to Karnataka and other states have been done in line with the finance commission's award with no discrimination whatsoever.

CONTINUED ON: P5

Congress outdated party with divisive narratives, says Modi

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR @ New Delhi

PICKING up from where he left off in his reply to the debate on the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address in Lok Sabha on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday trained his guns on the Congress again, accusing it of working against the interests of the marginalised sections of society and trying to create a wedge between north and south India.

Replying to the debate on the Motion of Thanks in the Rajya Sabha, Modi said the Congress had an 'anti-reservation' policy during Jawaharlal Nehru's time to shut out people from the SC, ST and OBC sections.

Modi claimed Nehru was against reservation and had it not been for Babasaheb Ambedkar, the underprivileged sections would not have had any quota. Nehru, Modi said, was of the opinion that the affirmative action to uplift the marginalised communities in the country would promote non-meritorious people and bring inefficiency into the system.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday | PTI

"Of late, I remember Nehru ji more often than not. He once wrote a letter to the CMs in which he had stated he was against reservation. He had reasoned it would promote inefficiency amongst the people of eligible sections," he said.

In an apparent reference to Karnataka deputy chief minister D K Shivakumar's brother and Congress MP D K Suresh's recent comment that South India should become a separate country, Modi said the grand old party was trying to divide the country for political gains.

Modi said the Congress has become such an 'outdated' party that it can only think in terms of how to generate new narratives to divide the country. He said there is no doubt the BJP-led alliance will get its third consecutive mandate.

Modi said in stark difference to the Congress' stand against the SC/STs, the BJP-led government has always accorded top priority to the welfare of marginalised communities.

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UCC bill passed, awaits prez assent

NARENDRA SETHI @ Dehradun

THE Uttarakhand Assembly on Wednesday passed the Uniform Civil Code bill through a voice vote after two days of deliberations. The bill now awaits President Droupadi Murmu's assent for its enactment.

The bill is expected to be the template for adoption by other BJP-ruled states like Gujarat and Assam.

The assembly rejected the opposition's demand to send the bill to a select committee of the House for vetting.

In his reply to the debate, Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said the legislation comprises 392 sections, with major emphasis on succession rights. It establishes a uniform legal framework applicable to all citizens, encompassing crucial aspects such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, and even live-in relationships, irrespective of religious affiliation, he added.

Uttarakhand CM Pushkar Singh Dhami before the special Assembly session on Wednesday | PTI

The Congress chose not to protest in the House during Dhami's speech. "The bill's paramount goal is to protect women's rights," Dhami said. The law applies to the whole of Uttarakhand and to people from the state living outside.

Apparently to bar the practice of *halala*, the bill specifies "the right to marry the divorced spouse without any condition, such as marrying a third person before such remarriage". It gives both husband and wife have equal rights to seek divorce.

The bill makes no distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children in terms of property rights.

K'TAKA IMPOSES BLANKET BAN ON ALL HOOKAH PRODUCTS

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

THE state government has imposed a blanket ban on all types of hookah products with immediate effect. A notification from the Health Department issued here on Wednesday stated that consumption, storage and sale of hookah products and advertisements related to them have been banned across the state.

Action will be initiated against those who violate this order issued under the Cigarette and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) 2003, Care and Protection of Children Act 2015, Food Safety and Standards Act 2006, Karnataka Poisons (Possession and Sale) Rules 2015, Indian Penal Code and the Fire Control and Fire Safety Act, the notification said.

Hookah has been categorised as a 'tobacco product' under the COTPA Act and 'nicotine' classified as 'poison' under the Karnataka Poisons Rules 2015. It has come to the notice of the government that many youngsters, especially college students, are getting addicted to hookah products, the notification said.

Stating that hookah is inhaled through pipes which are shared by many, the notification said this will help spread communicable diseases such as herpes, TB, hepatitis and Covid-19. It also noted that hookah bars are prone to fire accidents.

Health Commissioner Randeep said, "The Health Commissionerate proposed a ban on hookah products sometime ago, and the Health Department has issued the notification in this regard."

Moving tenants can continue Gruha Jyothi at new address

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

TENANTS who have registered for the Gruha Jyothi scheme and are shifting to a new address can look forward to resuming the scheme at their new residence conveniently. The state government on Wednesday issued orders directing the electricity supply corporations (Escoms) to start the process of providing an opportunity to consumers to de-link their accounts from the Gruha Jyothi scheme, for change of address and re-link on shifting.

The orders, signed on February 5, were issued on the request of the energy department, citing the cases of people who stay as tenants. "There are many who stay as tenants in Bengaluru or in other districts and cities, across the state. To avail the scheme, one has to register with his/her Aadhaar card details and RR number.

When the scheme was launched, a tenant would have registered along with the property owner or even individually with the Aadhaar card details. P4

Woman smashes KSRTC conductor's cellphone, hubby gifts him a new one

BR UDAYA KUMAR @ Hassan

A fight between a woman passenger and a conductor of a Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) bus ended in the latter getting a new cellphone worth Rs 10,000 from her husband in the city on Tuesday evening. The woman, who got into the bus to go to Saklespur along with her relatives, entered into an argument with the conductor when he asked her to get down stating that the bus was jam packed. The bus was proceeding to Kukke Subramanya from Hassan.

The woman got angry when the conductor stopped the bus and allegedly hit him with her footwear.

When the conductor started recording the incident, she snatched his cellphone. Abusing him in foul language, she smashed the cellphone to the ground before getting out of the bus.

Meanwhile, some KSRTC staff, who rushed to the spot, took the woman to task.

Those travelling in the bus also condemned her behaviour and supported the conductor.

The woman finally agreed to give a new phone to the conductor when some policemen arrived at the spot. She immediately telephoned her husband, who rushed to the spot with the new phone.

He apologised to the conductor for his wife's act and gave him the new phone in the presence of the KSRTC staff, police and passengers.

Some KSRTC staff, who rushed to the spot, took the woman to task. Those travelling in the bus also condemned her behaviour. When police arrived, she telephoned her husband, who rushed to the spot with the new phone